

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Case File No.: AA-81925

EA No.: AK-040-00-005

Type of Action: Special Recreation Permits (commercial tours and courses)

Location: Riggs/LeBlondeau Glacier: T. 30 S., R. 54 E., Sec. 20, 21, 28 & 29;
Bertha Glacier: T. 31 S., R. 57 E., Sec. 1-29, 33-36
Davidson Glacier: T. 32 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 1-36

Applicant(s): Alaska Mountain Guides Inc.
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Preparing Office: Bureau of Land Management
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Date: March 29, 2000

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose and Need for the Proposed Action:

Alaska Mountain Guides wishes to offer commercially guided mountaineering adventures on BLM administered lands. They currently offer mountaineering tours and courses ranging from 2-8 days in the Haines area. There is the only company/school in the Haines area offering these services. This service will meet anticipated public demand for quality guided services to the mountains and alpine glaciers surrounding Haines.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan:

No land use plan exists for this area. However, this environmental analysis assesses the impacts of the Proposed Action and provides a basis for a decision on the proposal {43 CFR 1610.8 (b)(1)}.

C. Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans:

The applicant must obtain a State of Alaska Business license.

Alaska Mountain Guides will be using fixed-wing aircraft to access BLM public lands in the Haines area. The BLM does not have jurisdiction to regulate aircraft flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by aircraft overflights or flight seeing operations. BLM may regulate landing locations and on-the-ground commercial activities. Enroute operations may be indirectly influenced by requiring certain standards to be met as a condition of receiving a permit.

Permit holders are required to abide by all federal, state, county (borough), or municipal laws, ordinances, or regulations which are applicable to the areas or the operations covered in the permit. Failure to do so could result in either suspension or revocation of the permit.

The airport in Haines has untowered facilities and is under the jurisdiction of the FAA. The FAA is the agency responsible for all aircraft travel in uncontrolled airspace. The Flight Standards Division of the FAA is responsible for all flight operations (including safety) in controlled and uncontrolled airspace.

The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) for the FAA and the Department of Transportation Volume 14, Chapter 1, part 135.203 states:

“Except when necessary for take-off and landing, no person may operate under visual flight rules (VFR) an airplane, below 500 feet above the surface or less than 500 feet horizontally from any obstacle”

Refer to EA-AK-040-95-015, Environmental Assessment for Helicopter Landing Tours in the Skagway and Haines Area, Pages 1-10 through 1-12 (available at the BLM Anchorage Field Office), for further information on other required laws and permits pertaining to jurisdiction and regulation of aircraft, flight paths, altitudes, or noise caused by aircraft.

A BLM Special Recreation Permit (SRP) regulates commercial services on BLM public land and related water pursuant to 43 CFR 8372 and Handbook H-8372-1. As the land is selected by the State of Alaska, a concurrence in accordance with Section 906(k) of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) is required.

The Coastal Zone Management Act requires the BLM, when consulting or authorizing activities or undertaking development directly affecting the coastal zone, to insure that the activities or development be consistent with the approved Alaska Coastal Management Program to the maximum practical extent. The activities under the Proposed Action are consistent with the Alaska Coastal Management Program.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action:

Alaska Mountain Guides is based out of Haines, Alaska. They propose to conduct guided mountaineering adventures and treks on lands west of Haines. (See map in Case File AA-81925.) Operation areas on public land would include the following locations within the Copper River Meridian:

Riggs/LeBlondeau Glacier: T. 30 S., R. 54 E., Sec. 20, 21, 28 & 29;
Bertha Glacier: T. 31 S., R. 57 E., Sec. 1-29, 33-36;
Davidson Glacier: T. 32 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 1-36

Alaska Mountain Guides would like to place a temporary 12' X 16' weather port on the Davidson Glacier (T. 32 S., R. 58 E., Sec. 19) to serve as a base camp for their courses in that area. Courses and tours will range from 2-8 days. The weather port would be placed on a plywood and beam floor and used for cooking and classroom purposes only. All clients and staff will camp in smaller 4 man tents. All solid human waste and trash will be flown out with each return trip to Haines. The entire weather port, including flooring, will be flown out at the end of the use season.

The operation season is from May 15th to August 15th. It is estimated that this operation will have approximately 200-300 user days per season.

Typically, clients will spend the entire course at or near the Davidson Glacier base camp. A few clients may trek across the glaciers to Bertha or Riggs glaciers. These are custom trips and are rare. Group size for the custom trips range from 2 to 10 people, depending on the type of course.

Access to the base camp is with fixed-wing aircraft (Cessna 185 wheel/ski planes). Flight routes to Glacier landing sites from Haines are well established and adhere to local traffic patterns (see attached "Landing Sites and Flight Routes"). Upon departing Haines, altitude gains are primarily over the Lynn Canal (Chilkat Inlet) and mild terrain. Altitude gains to landing site elevations are made prior to flying up drainages or canyons. Landing sites for Alaska Mountain Guides are between 3,200 and 6,000 feet.

An EA on Helicopter Glacier Tours (EA-AK-040-95-015) was completed on May 10, 1995 which analyzes impacts of helicopter use in the same area. The mitigation measures adopted in that Decision Record are incorporated in the Proposed Action.

B. No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative would be to continue present management and not authorize commercial mountaineering courses and tours on these BLM-administered lands.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

All of the land described in the Proposed Action has been selected by the State of Alaska as part of its entitlement at statehood. BLM is responsible for management of the land until it is conveyed to the State or the selection is relinquished.

The use area locations listed above are all well above tree line which occurs at approximately 5,000 feet. Access will be restricted (due to the limitations of the ski-plane) to high glaciers covered in snow. Accessible landing areas are primarily headwater ice fields that often are the culmination of several glaciers creating expansive flat areas. The vast majority of landings for Alaska Mountain Guides will be at the Davidson Glacier weather port. This glacier landing is more than 6,000 ft. high. Alaska Mountain Guides will be chartering Mountain Flying Service to fly clients to and from the base camp on Davidson Glacier. Although the fixed wing landing areas may be different than a helicopter, some flight routes may be similar.

Some ice fields have rugged bare rock outcrop islands which may serve as potential habitat for local goat populations. See EA AK-040-95-015 (p. 3-18, E.4.e and p. 3-19, E.4.h, i.) for descriptions of specific glaciers and their affected environment. The actual

mountaineering courses and tours will range in altitude from 2,500-7,000 feet.

A. Critical Elements:

It has been determined that the following Critical Elements of the human environment are either not present or would not be affected by the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative:

- Air Quality
- Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs)
- Cultural/Paleontological Resources
- Environmental Justice (EJ)
- Farm Lands (prime or unique)
- Floodplains
- Invasive, Non-Native Species
- Native American Religious Concerns
- Subsistence
- T&E Species
- Wastes (Hazardous/Solid)
- Water Quality (Surface/Ground)
- Wetlands/Riparian
- Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Wilderness

1. ANILCA Section 810 (a), Evaluation and Finding:

These lands are selected by the State of Alaska and therefore do not fall under the definition of Federal Public Lands under ANILCA Section 102 (3) or under the authority of the Federal Subsistence Board or Subsistence Management Regulations for the harvest of Fish and Wildlife on Federal Public Lands in Alaska. Should these lands be relinquished, this would fall under the authorities of ANILCA Section 810 (a).

B. Wildlife:

For specific discussion on the affected environment for wildlife see EA-AK-040-95-015, (p. 3-18, E.4.e and p. 3-19 E.4.h, i). This discusses the wildlife habitat and issues specific to the glaciers in the Takhinsha Mountains, which are the primary landing areas for Alaska Mountain Guides. This Proposed Action will vary from the discussions in the EA in that Alaska Mountain Guides utilizes the expansive flat areas at the very head of tributary glaciers.

C. Recreation:

During the scoping meetings for EA-AK-040-95-015, specific areas were identified by the public where the impact of aircraft noise could adversely affect recreationists. The Proposed Action does not include any of these areas.

There are no known hiking trails to the snow fields and glaciers listed for the Proposed Action.

D. Socio-Economics:

The town of Haines, Alaska has a seasonal, but strong tourism based economy. Retail shops, restaurants, hotels, transportation and tours generate substantial income for the business community and sales tax revenues for the city. Active tourism businesses support other sectors of the community through spin-off purchases.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Impacts of the Proposed Action:

1. Wildlife:

Wildlife would experience two types of aircraft encounters and a human presence. The first is enroute flight activity where aircraft are passing by wildlife and their habitats. The second is in the areas proposed for landing, taking off, and recreation mountaineering activities.

Enroute flight routes could pass by mountain goats, brown bear, black bear, wolves, moose, and raptors engaged in a wide variety of activities depending on time of year, time of day and location. The short term exposure to noise and visual stimuli from aircraft enroute is minimized when at an adequate distance from wildlife. The species most likely to be impacted by the Proposed Action would be mountain goats. Response will vary depending on distance to escape cover, terrain and duration of exposure. Mountain goats on late winter range (March and April), kidding habitat areas (May 1 to June 15) and on isolated habitat, such as land islands surrounded by snow and ice fields, may be stressed. It is anticipated that fixed wing aircraft passing 1,500 ft. or more from mountain goats will cause little to no visible reaction such as a flight (running) response. Multi-agency personnel are in the process of determining adequate distances as little is currently known of impacts physiologically or behaviorally on mountain goats from aircraft.

Most species of wildlife become accustomed to aircraft stimuli if the perceived threat is minimized by distance, short duration of exposure,

repeated patterns of flight, and avoidance of critical life cycle periods and habitats. Tolerance limits of wildlife species in the proposed area are not well known.

The take-off and landing areas at high altitudes require use of maximum power during take-off and thus a higher level of noise. Duration of take-off noise is expected to last from one to two minutes during which a safe altitude is reached. Landing areas are at the extreme limits of goat habitat. Some bare rock outcrops in ice fields may have small numbers of goats on them. Goats access islands of habitat by crossing extensive ice fields and may occupy some year long. They would be most affected during aircraft take-off procedures due to the sustained engine noise. Responses could range from no visible response to temporary displacement from the rock island habitat to permanent abandonment. The goats' response would likely vary depending on distance of the rock island habitat from the take-off and landing sites. Repeated high numbers of take-offs near the rock islands could result in temporary or permanent displacement of animals.

There is additional discussion on the noise impacts to wildlife within EA-AK-040-95-015, pages 3-11 through 3-13.

2. Recreation:

Noise impacts to people participating in a variety of recreational activities in the areas may increase. These areas are also accessed by non-commercial back country enthusiasts for recreation via chartered aircraft or extended treks. The number of people in the area disturbed by aircraft is anticipated to be low since most people access these areas by aircraft and are not sensitive to an occasional aircraft flying by or landing.

Recreationists could be impacted through the interruption of their solitude and quiet by the noise from aircraft overflights while involved in hunting, hiking, camping or other high alpine activities. Enroute flight would pose the least amount of noise and visual impacts. Aircraft from the communities of Skagway and Haines, flying over this area are common. These flights involve commuter and flight seeing trips to Glacier Bay National Park by at least three different companies. The flights by Alaska Mountain Guides would increase the number of aircraft potentially passing by.

More direct impact may result from the take-off procedures at the actual landing area. Maximum engine horsepower is required to gain a safe

take-off speed and may result in increased noise. Impacts would be low because of the short duration and low number of people, in most cases zero near the landing/take-off areas. Some recreationists may also sense some visual disturbance to the presence of aircraft in high alpine areas.

3. Socio-Economics:

The Proposed Action for Alaska Mountain Guides expands their operation potential and thus plays an increased role in the community tax base.

B. Impacts of the No Action Alternative:

The No Action Alternative may reduce the potential socio-economic impacts in the form of the community tax base and for the municipality of Haines, Alaska. Because this is the only guide service of its kind in Haines, there is also a potential loss of mountaineering/recreational opportunities for people who feel this area would be inaccessible without guide service.

C. Cumulative Impacts:

In 1995, EA-AK-040-95-015 analyzed the effect of glacier landings on several glaciers in the Skagway/Haines area. A large number of landings allowed in the area west of Haines have not occurred because the applicant didn't start his business

The 30 to 50 landings proposed would be approximately five percent of the allowed number in the 1995 EA.

Cumulative noise impacts at landing areas are expected to be minimal if aircraft landing areas are located away from rock island habitats or are well above expected goat populations.

D. Mitigation Measures:

If goats are observed on rock islands, landing areas must be located a minimum of one mile from the observed goat activity. Flight paths should be altered to avoid flying over rock islands with observed goat activity.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

A. Persons and Agencies Consulted:

State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources
Land Status, Letter of Concurrence

U.S. Forest Service, Juneau Ranger District,
Wildlife Consultation
Past and current NEPA documentation concerning glacier landing tours

Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Wildlife Consultation

City of Skagway
Socio-Economics,
Tourism

Lynn Canal Conservation, Inc.
Environmental, Wildlife, Recreation issues

B. List of Preparers:

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